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AUTHOR	Coombe, Kennece; Lubawy, Joy
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ABSTRACT

A study examined six aspects of learning communities in early childhood settings in rural New South Wales (Australia). These aspects are reflection, individual development, diversity, conversation, caring, and shared responsibility. Surveys of 15 directors of early childhood programs indicated that the reflective component of the learning community had some merit for preschool, but staff should be encouraged to reflect methodically, collegially, and with purpose. The developmental aspect appeared to be highly dependent on in-house strategies or serendipitous learning in a process of teaching by doing rather than by justifying, explaining, or theorizing. Analysis of the diverse community component pointed to a need to spread some power and control and the associated responsibilities. The conversational aspect of the learning community appeared to be well-developed, though more effective listening may be needed to foster feelings of empowerment and ownership in others. It is the caring community with which early childhood educators most closely identify. The caring aspect comprises the universal attributes of the interdependence of members; giving and receiving, nurturing relationships; and a positive approach to working with young children and their families. The directors' comments were useful in explicating this phenomenon. Although teachers did recognize that boundaries of confidentiality and professional accountabilities prevented a total sharing of responsibility within their centers, they acknowledged the benefits of sharing the load both in terms of reduced stress for teachers and empowerment of other stakeholders. (TD)

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Learning partnerships in rural early childhood settings

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Kennece Coombe and Joy Lubawy
(Charles Sturt University)

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Abstract

In educational settings, there has been a move towards developing learning communities. The works of Senge (1992) and Sergiovanni (1994, 1999) for example, have pointed to the advantages for organisations of developing an ethos approaching that of a learning community. Harris (1999) takes this further when she identifies a number of different types of learning community. When these identifiers were applied to early childhood settings in one rural city, it was found that although the directors were keen to involve families and children as part of a learning community approach, the result more often took on the characteristics of 'partnership'. Partnerships encouraged collaboration and consultation but the final arbiter was the director. The predominant aim of this paper is to report on a project which sought to elicit from a group of directors information about their practices and whether these practices might fit within the framework of a learning community or a learning partnership.

Introduction

The facilitation of learning communities in early childhood offers the opportunity for continued learning and development for all stakeholders within the service. Popular forms of inservice professional development are not easily accessible for teachers working in early childhood services beyond the geographical boundaries of major centres. Even then, the information that is offered tends to be metrocentric in its orientation and ignores the lived realities of professionals working in isolation from their peers.

The focus on learning in preschools particularly has focussed on the needs of children. Recent literature however has broadened this attention to meeting the needs also of parents and teachers. The development of learning communities in education promotes shared responsibility for the well-being of community members. In such a way, it is anticipated that membership of the learning community will result in benefits for all stakeholders. The learning community of the adult world also supports the learning community of the child. For children, there is the opportunity to direct their own learning; for parents, there is an acceptance of their role in children's lives

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and in the educational setting; for educators, there is the opportunity to reduce stress-related burnout and to promote more effective reflective practice.

Literature review

The literature pertinent to this project is that which encompasses the areas of learning communities, the needs of children and parents in educational settings, the professional development of teachers in the early childhood area, and the overlap of these three components.

In early childhood education, there appears to be a universal acknowledgement of the principles of Reggio Emilia in the broader context of an emergent curriculum. Katz and Chard (1996) point out that "the municipal preprimary schools in the northern city of Reggio Emilia have been attracting worldwide attention for more than a decade". They indicate that the Reggio Emilia Approach contributes greatly to children's learning because children feel that their work is valued, parents have an opportunity to become "deeply aware of their children's experience in the school" (p. 2) and teachers can "reflect on the work in progress and the discussion which surrounded it" (p. 2).

While it should not be discounted that exposure to such principles has enhanced early childhood educators' perceptions of what constitutes good practice with children, the researchers undertaking the present project hold to the view that other members of the learning community need to be considered with similar care and focus. Karr and Landerholme (1996) point out that teachers have been encouraged to include parents in their centres. The research conducted by these authors however indicates that teachers may expect all parents to become partners with them in teaching their children and then become frustrated when they don't. Teachers tend to blame themselves for failing in their duties. The researchers suggest that neither teachers nor parents need to feel any failure if parents participate only in support activities. Rather, there is more likely to be a sense of success for both groups, which, in turn, acts to reduce stress and ultimately benefits the children.

When teachers are feeling supported in the workplace, they are less likely to suffer from the negative stress that appears to be so prevalent in early childhood settings. This is clearly indicated in the literature that points to the levels of staff burnout as well as that which indicates parental concern with the quality and appropriateness of early care and education. Hill (1995) points out that when teachers feel challenged, in control of their lives and have a sense of belonging, they are more able to be a strong attachment figure for children.

Perhaps the most telling research into stress and staff burnout amongst those who work with young children is that by Manlove (1994). She considered three aspects of staff burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and levels of personal accomplishment. Similarly, Warnemuende (1996) identifies the characteristics of charisma, idealism, perfectionism and goal-orientation as the front-runners for encouraging stress and burnout. She suggests that taking a proactive role to gain control over the stress by altering the work situation will help to avoid burnout. Such factors as those identified by both Manlove and Warnemuende are exaggerated in settings where the teacher alone has to bear the emotional as well as physical responsibility for the entire group.

The implications from the research of each of the authors referred to here can be addressed in the learning community. Raywid (1993) for example, identifies six qualities of communities in schools: respect, caring, inclusiveness, trust, empowerment and commitment. Coombe (1999) advocates that "in a learning community, the ethic of caring should predominate ... as a genuine commitment to the well-being of others" (p. 95). Within the learning community, there is developed the notion of mutuality of caring. Coombe (1999) suggests that: parents have the right to hold the expectations that they, as parents, will have the opportunity to grow and develop through their association with the learning community; children become self-directed learners; and teachers benefit from collegial reflection to refresh themselves professionally.

Such views reflect the findings of Copley and Padron (1997) and of the Aspen Systems Corporation (1997a), which indicate that in a learning community, teachers have the opportunity to participate in a variety of professional development activities

and learning opportunities. The Aspen Systems Corporation (1997b) also identified nine action tools to support learning communities in early childhood education which target continuing professional development of staff; building partnerships with parents and strengthening parents' advocacy skills.

In particular, it is the notion of social support that is the foundation of the learning community. Writing over a century ago, Tönnies (1887 cited in Sergiovanni, 1994) identified the stresses implicit in moving from close social relationships of community (gemeinschaft) to a more structured society and work environment (gesellschaft). Sergiovanni (1994) points out that in such a shift, community values are replaced by contractual ones. He draws on the work of Tönnies to elaborate three forms of community: community of kinship, of place, and of mind:

> *Community by kinship emerges from the special kinds of relationships among people that create a unity of being similar to that found in families and other closely knit collections of people. Community of place emerges from the sharing of a common habitat or locale. This sharing of place with others for sustained periods of time creates a special identity and a shared sense of belonging. Community of mind emerges from the binding of people to common goals, shared values, and shared conceptions of being and doing. Together the three represent webs of meaning that tie people together by creating a sense of belonging and a common identity.*
>
> (Sergiovanni, 1994, p. 219)

Harris (1999) discusses six qualifiers of learning communities: Reflective communities which encourage insights into strengths and weaknesses as learners; Developmental communities that acknowledge differences in the ways individuals learn; Diverse communities where talents are recognised and impact upon decisions about curriculum, teaching and assessment; Conversational communities involving active discourse and exchange of ideas and values; Caring communities which encourage shared respect and helping others grow as learners; and, Responsible communities where teachers, pupils and parents come to view themselves as part of a social web of meanings and responsibilities.

The qualifiers offered by Harris along with the definitive statements from Sergiovanni and others point to broad support for the theoretical value of learning communities as

settings of mutual caring, empowerment and involvement. The research discussed here seeks to develop this theory and then to make a practical nexus between the theory and the realities of early childhood settings in the Riverina region.

Research plan, methods and techniques

The research incorporated survey, interview, workshops and focus group techniques. The staged introduction of each of these techniques was designed to ensure a cohesive action research program. Each component fed into subsequent sections. For example, the first round survey offered direction for the initial workshop which was open to all early childhood professionals in the Riverina catchment. The evaluation focus group comprising five educators followed the first workshop and directed the planning for the second workshop. In this way, the ongoing research incorporated a direct response to the professional development needs of the teachers in the journey towards a learning community. At the time of writing the final evaluation is yet to be conducted. Predominantly for this reason, the results presented here are derived only from the survey round.

The survey

The survey was distributed to 15 Directors in the Wagga Wagga region in December 1999, nine replies were received. All of the directors were women. Participants could choose to respond in writing or by receiving a phone call from one of the researchers who then recorded verbal comments. The responses were coded to fit the six qualifiers identified by Harris and these will be used to frame the remainder of this report. The names that have been applied in this report are fictitious and designed to mask the real identity of the directors.

a. Reflective communities

Reflective communities focus on determining strengths and weaknesses in teaching and learning. Only one of the directors indicated that she undertook to identify the general strengths and weaknesses of herself and her staff on a formal basis. All other directors reported that they used a more informal process. Ashlee, for example, said that the teachers in her centre identified strengths and weaknesses as teachers in,

So many ways. We prefer to do this in a subtle, gentle and supportive way. We prefer this to a bureaucratic, formal paperwork type of way – AND IT WORKS WELL FOR US. WE HAVE A HAPPY LONG-SERVING TEAM OF PEOPLE. (Her upper case)

Danielle explained the informality of her observations as:

During informal chats we often talk about how someone handled an activity well or presented a group or handled a tricky situation. We probably focus on the positives and don't really evaluate the negatives.

Barbara had a different approach. She wrote:

I myself continuously evaluate my strengths and weaknesses. I mainly focus on my weaknesses. I also look at others' strengths and weaknesses. From these observations of staff's strengths and weaknesses, I then model the appropriate behaviour. ...[I do this through] mainly evaluation of discussions about issues. Depending on the situation, I usually praise staff for their positive efforts (strengths). In regard to weaknesses, I ask the staff the reason behind this and then take on board their comments. I state why it needs to be done this way giving justification for my decisions.

The question of identifying the *learning* strengths and weaknesses of self and staff elicited a range of comments. Danielle, for example, was almost nonplussed, "Mmm! Good question! I'm not sure that I have ever done this with my staff." Leonora said, "We regularly comment on things we learn as we are teaching the children; we become aware of weaknesses when we can't answer the children's questions."

Jill's centre took a more active approach to learning. Jill indicated,

We do reflect on our own learning. We evaluate it through parental feedback amongst other things. We're willing to learn. I'll tell you, new eyes are great. They see things we're not even aware of. Prac students too bring yummy ideas.

Similarly Caroline reported that staff in her centre continued their learning through reading, "various articles and reference materials. We attend seminars/workshops to develop skills."

The reflective component of the learning community then, has some merit for the preschool. Areas that require development and definition though, appear to be those

wherein staff are encouraged to reflect methodically, collegially and with purpose. This is so, both in terms of identifying strengths and weaknesses and acting to improve practice based on these reflections.

b. Developmental community

There is some overlap between this form of community and the reflective one. Specifically, the ways in which the centres sought to acknowledge differences and then to use them to effect included:

> *K's strength is in music. She teaches me a lot of ideas from other places. You won't ever know everything, but working, as a team is fantastic with different teaching styles – so it's not just my voice and my methods.* (Clare)

- *Role modelling, guidance and support*
- *I use these in planning – who does what and rotate it*
- *Identifying these with my own learning style directs my finding alternative supplementary teaching strategies.* (Natasha)

> *We utilise different abilities of staff to use everyone's strengths; Also try to work on each other's weaknesses – support each other and advise.* (Leonora)

> *Yes. We use a lot of team teaching and this way staff can be the team leader when it is a topic or activity where they are very confident or, vice versa, they can be the person in the background.* (Danielle)

The developmental community appears to be highly dependent on in-house strategies or serendipitous learning in a process of teaching by doing rather than necessarily by justifying, explaining or theorising.

Diverse communities

Diverse communities, as the name implies, concern themselves with recognising differences in order to address particular needs and interests. This is closely reflected in curriculum development, whose decisions count when it comes to deciding important components of the curriculum and the flexibility that is permitted within

that structure. The directors were asked about how they organised the curriculum, who determined the content, how did they respond to differences in learning of individual children and how the curriculum responded to the different talents and interests of children, staff and parents.

Without exception, the directors indicated that they, personally, determined the curriculum. Some justified this stance by pointing out that they had the qualifications and experience to do this. One director, Natasha, averred that she strives to:

- Implement latest research/ staff development eg Macquarie Uni conferences or literature/art;
- Curriculum determination varies according to interests of staff, children and parents, combined with constructionist theory of learning and learning styles of children in front of me in terms of child development and child centredness.

In terms of responding to differences, the directors acknowledged that first one has to know what the interests are and then to cater for them. Clare, for example, mentioned that she had attended a kinesiologist in-service and so felt comfortable using the techniques of focussing. She said, "You have to know who are visual learners and just be aware of how children learn." Natasha's strategy for tuning in to children's needs was a three-fold one:

- *by knowing my children well and their families;*
- *by analysing their individual learning styles; and*
- *forming positive relationships with each child – community awareness.*

The directors' responses to the different talents and interests of children, parents and staff that are available within the community was almost universally to use whatever help they could get.

> *I use everyone's talents that are on offer: Grandparents and so on. They stay around and talk about what they have. I take whatever I can from whomever I can. It's important to know about their interests and backgrounds.* (Clare)

There was also that sense of trying to keep people involved through:

- *discussion/sharing real life happenings;*
- *opportunity to bring/tell us of interests/happenings (at the door stuff); and*
- *listening to all! Follow up -> research -> check out how peers have extended interests.* (Natasha)

Incorporating talents, interests into the program, Inviting them to share their talents and interests at any time. Sharing knowledge, comparing own experiences, researching to find more information. (Leonora)

By allowing people to participate in curriculum decisions, teaching and assessment at a level they feel comfortable with (recognising and accepting different abilities, training and qualifications). (Elizabeth)

Offer time, resources and opportunities to allow these to be further developed. (Caroline)

Analysis of the diverse community component points to a need to spread some power and control and the associated responsibilities. There is the opportunity to encourage proactive responses from staff and parents as well as a far greater openness to the interests and needs of children.

Conversational communities

A conversational community relies heavily on an active discourse and an exchange of ideas and values. The conversational community appears to be effected in these preschools through the now-traditional forms of newsletters and noticeboards but also incorporate:

Suggestion book for parents; children's groups where children are encouraged to work collaboratively and to share ideas. (Bernadine)

Parent/teacher chats; lots of talking and discussion. (Caroline)

Conversation, communication, gestures. (Elizabeth)

We encourage children's ideas mainly through communication and play. When I say communication, it's mainly conversation and listening. We also encourage children's learning by providing open-ended activities as well as questioning techniques. I encourage staff feedback and ideas and then usually state my justification. I encourage conversation with parents to gain ideas and background information and to get something of an idea of where they're coming from. (Barbara)

The conversational community appears to be well-developed though there may need to be further consideration of effective listening in order to foster feelings of empowerment and ownership in others, so that the teachers are able to be more in tune with the community of which they are but a part.

Caring communities

It is perhaps the caring community with which early childhood educators most closely identify. Caring communities encourage shared respect and help other to grow as learners. This is reflected in some ways by the Reggio Emilia concept of 'images of the child' wherein the child is seen as able, having knowledge and capable of expressing ideas. The caring community however goes beyond a focus only on the child and recognises similar characteristics for other members of the community. The directors were asked to comment on how the members of their centre help each other to grow as learners.

The predominant responses from the directors included notions of communication and sharing. For example, the response from Leonora provided a good summary of the general ideas of the group. She pointed out that the members of her community enjoy, "Providing and swapping ideas, knowledge and resources; giving each other advice etc; sharing interesting information and topics of interest and objects etc.". Comments of a similar nature were made by others:

Everyone contributes and passes on knowledge. We have no forum for parents to formally share ideas but they do it informally. We have regular parent meetings and a parent library. (Clare)

We work towards the same goals, supporting each other and sharing the roles amongst the staff. We encourage children to help each other by

getting a friend to help and we praise contributions to the kindy by members of the community. (Jill)

We have open communication amongst all. We use displays of what we've been doing. (Bernadine)

The use of the ascription, 'caring community', is something of a tautology in the parlance of early childhood settings. It contains within it the universal attributes of the interdependence of members, the giving and receiving caring/ sharing/ nurturing relationships and a positive approach to working with young children and their families. The comments made by the directors involved in the study were useful in explicating this phenomenon.

Responsible communities

The final form of learning community identified by Harris is that of the responsible community. The responsible community is one in which teachers, pupils and parents come to view themselves as part of a social web of meanings and responsibilities. This community is of particular interest to those directors working in sole charge positions in rural settings. These teachers work in isolation from their professional peers. They take on the dual roles of management and leadership. It is this duality in particular which directors commented upon as resulting in stress and conflict. When asked to specify aspects of being a director in a rural early childhood setting which they found most demanding, the teachers commented:

It's not the children or the environment. It's the paperwork, paperwork. Things like the ASPARD funding document and applying for funding for children with special needs. (Clare)

It's administration. It's out of control. Filling in bits of paper and having no money. (Natasha)

Lack of time to do important things like researching, observations and programming. Instead, it's paperwork, administration duties that take the place of teaching duties. (Bernadine)

Not sufficient time to get everything done during normal working hours. (Elizabeth)

It's hard to get the balance right between home and work especially when personal expectations are 150%. (Jill)

On the other hand, the directors also pointed to the value of partnerships and shared values. The comments they made in relation to these issues included:

It's good to make them feel that they have ownership in the centre – a sense of value/belonging to the centre. Their talents are used. There's a diverse range of backgrounds. (Clare)

The parents are reading/witnessing/listening to me and the staff. They are valuing the uniqueness and creativity of the children especially their artworks. Elizabeth)

We've encouraged this by aesthetic display and have given suggestions about how to care for/ preserve the works. The parents continue to provide blank pieces of paper to their children even when they leave preschool. (Natasha)

It's great when you get the message through that play is fabulous. We have parent nights, and come and play days. We explain what the children are doing. ... The teacher needs to have a 'have-a-go' approach but also be able to delegate and share with realistic expectations. (Jill)

Although the teachers did recognise that there were boundaries of confidentiality and professional accountabilities which prevented a total sharing of responsibility within their centres, they acknowledged the benefits of 'sharing the load' both in terms of reduced stress for teachers and empowerment of other stakeholders.

Concluding comments

In a region such as the Riverina, early childhood educators have limited opportunities for professional development. Throughout the conduct of the research, the teachers were drawn into a learning community and recognised the value of including other

stakeholders in the shared decision-making. They recognised that open communication amongst and between stakeholders is necessary for a successful emergent curriculum that can respond to, support and extend children's learning in an environment in which adults and children work in partnership.

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Signature: Colin Boyle

Printed Name: COLIN BOYLE

Address: P.O. Box 588
Wagga Wagga
NSW 2678
AUSTRALIA

Position*: SENIOR LECTURER

Organization: Charles Sturt Uni

Telephone No: +612-6933-2495

Date: 6-11-2002

* Executive Committee, SPERA